

Archive of the Displaced

PAULA ABOOD
UTS

The Archive of the Displaced is an ongoing community cultural development project that traverses time, genre and space. It is a project that is grounded in a critical awareness of voice, agency and empowerment. This archive is both a refuge and a destination, most especially for those who have experienced loss and dislocation, for those who have been forced to flee their homeland in fear of their lives, and those who live in the margins of dispossession.

For the refugee, telling one's story is a gesture towards healing. The act of recounting story is at once painful and emancipatory. It is about recuperating the self from the status of other. It is also about speaking up and speaking back. This archive is as much about a struggle for recognition as it is a testimony to survival. Thus, the Archive of the Displaced is concerned with what cultural theorist Lisa Suheir Majaj calls 'the necessity of testimony as a mode of resistance' (209). Resistance against invisibility and forgetfulness; resistance against supremacist demands to integrate, and against master narratives that drown out and subsume other voices; and finally, resistance against benign articulations of exotic and sympathetic difference, and attempts to elide accents and efface narratives that offend white sensibilities.

Haitian scholar Myriam Chancy asks:

How do we reclaim ourselves ... without a firm presence in the very circles that keep us perpetually on their peripheries, looking in? ... How do we affirm our existence, even in those margins, without a language of our own making, especially when language has become an arena of perpetual struggle for so many of us who have had to function with imposed, European language as a result of colonisation and displacement? (7)

These questions are at the heart of the work of community cultural development, a practice that seeks to empower marginalised communities through the creative process of storytelling. Theorist Margaret Ledwith affirms that critical community development always focuses on 'the stories of the people as the basis of action and reflection' (67). In real terms, the importance of such a model 'lies in its capacity to provide a structure for locating the deeply personal within the profoundly political, and thereby to move understanding from personal empowerment to collective action for transformative change' (Ledwith 67). This is crucial if we are to move beyond simple acts of telling stories and empathetic listening to the urgency of disrupting global discourses and sabotaging inhumane policies that place vulnerable peoples in constant danger.

Community cultural development as a model of critical praxis is most effective when it occurs in the spaces in-between, at the peripheries and in the margins as an enabling

process. For small and emerging communities, building social infrastructures and constructing identities is paramount as they come to realise the requirements for recognition within the multicultural state. As communities busy themselves in the complexities of settlement, traditional lore fades to black as the next generation, like countless migrant and refugee communities before, privilege Western aesthetics and cultural idioms over the ones the parental generations are keen to maintain, and indeed, pass on.

With this in mind, an aim of community cultural development work tends towards engaging intermodal multicultural forms and disparate ways of being. This in itself has been a driving force in challenging the political and racialised contexts of living as a minority in an English-speaking world. In short, CCD storytelling projects have provided marginalised communities with the tools to develop a language and lexicon that is underpinned by an avowedly assertive politics of self-determination. This is as much an attempt to displace the banal monologue about difference, thus undermining the diatribe that gets passed off as dialogue in Australian cultural and public spheres. This is most evident in the case of asylum seekers and refugees, where the voices of those very subjects are pushed to the margins and reduced to an aversive embodiment of otherness, while white liberals speak over and above the shadows in order to drown out white supremacist voices spruiking their particular strain of race paranoia.

Some notes from the archive. In *Bread and Other Stories*, a project initiated by Bankstown Multicultural Area Network in 2001, Redija Hodzic writes:

Imagine tomorrow morning you wake up
All the men between the ages of eighteen and forty-two suddenly disappear.

You don't know where your son is.
You don't know where your brother is.
You don't know where your father is.
You are scared.
All you can do is wait.
You experience the full length of the night.

Omeima Sukkarieh writes:

I am the tears so fragile,
they fall from the sky.
My lips sewn together
with a thread of life.
My hands like leaves,
they shake when it blows.
And my heart it hurts
when there is nowhere to go.

And Samila Hatami writes:

I scream out to the world
But no one hears my voice
No one listens to my words

Who could imagine war

Ledwith reminds us that ‘voice is an expression of self-esteem; it is rooted in the belief that what we have to say is relevant and of value. If we are not heard with respect, our voices are silenced’ (62). Ledwith’s point is that ‘the simple act of listening to people’s stories, respectfully giving one’s full attention, is an act of personal empowerment ...’ (62).

In this way, the Archive of the Displaced is a living repository for voice. It is a space from which perhaps dialogue might emerge given the conditions for intersubjective activity undergo radical change. Anti-racism activist Floya Anthias argues that:

dialogue cannot be guaranteed by the coming together of different cultural groups ... nor can it simply be guaranteed by a formula such as being rooted in one set of cultural idioms whilst respecting and acknowledging the other, i.e. as an ethical encounter, where asymmetric relations exist. The conditions for ‘voice’, of being allowed to speak from a ‘different’ place, are important. However, what is central is being able to make effective the claims of the voice (40).

More from the archive. The Afghan Women’s Dobaiti Poetry Project brought Afghan women together at an especially difficult time to develop creative expression through prose and the construction of Dobaiti poetry, a specific literary form. The process was complex, words and worlds moving between genres and languages, this transversively creative undertaking culminated in the publication, *Poetry Across Rooftops*. Rukhshana Sarwar, Zahera Noor, Sediqa Anwari, Toorpikai Hashemi, Nooria Razban, Nadera Hakimi, Aqila Hassani, Lailuma Reza, Nabila Mushrif, Samila Hatami, Aqila Reza, Latifa Ahmadzai, Habiba Shafaq, Nasima Rafat and Hadisa Aymaq all contributed to the development of new poetic works in the little spaces in Western and south west Sydney in the lead-up to the traumatic events of September 11 2001. The women write:

A stunning dusk in Bakwa and Sadyan
Reveals the face of every Afghan
Tired of war, hunger and drought
Waiting for the beloved who have gone without

God has given me a pure heart
There is no one who knows even a small part
Of my suffering, no one knows my mind
That is why understanding is hard to find

My homeland, Afghanistan, my spirit and soul
I have a recurring dream to reach a goal
Never will I forget your beauty or scape
It moves me to live in hope

My wounded heart cries bitterly longing
My face tells the story of despair and separation
In the beautiful land of migration
The buds of my thoughts are blossoming

Anthias affirms that the notion of dialogue involves:

asserting the role of talk and voice, the right to be heard and the responsibility to listen. Such basic intersubjective competencies are important to structure the framework of debate at all social levels, including being a central element in the school curriculum (42).

This certainly underpinned how *The Book of African Australian Stories*, a project that brought together children from small and emerging refugee communities, young people, artists, storytellers and writers to create a collection of contemporary stories, came to be. Participant Malkia Malula writes:

I wish I could start my story with ‘Once upon a time’ like other children’s stories, but I can’t because my story is not a fairy tale ... I come from the Congo Republic. I can barely remember running away with my parents from our country. There was trouble everywhere ... what I do remember well is Kakuma refugee camp ... refugees who escaped such terrible wars, were treated badly. It was as if we were not human beings, but dogs ... I sometimes thought that the ones who died were luckier.

Sahr Yongai writes:

I prayed to God to save me from the war
Because it was the scariest thing I ever saw
But the war went on for about 10 years
People remember the dead through their tears
I thought it was over but it started again
Those who survive remain in pain

Naima Abdullah, a parent involved in this project reflects on the value of engaging in the creative: ‘this sort of project is invaluable because it builds young people’s self-esteem and develops children’s social skills and sense of the world’ (Abood and Yongai). This project fills a lacuna in the reading lives of Somali, Sudanese, Eritrean, Liberian, Ethiopian, Congolese and Sierra Leonean children in Sydney, but as we know, these stories and the voices of African Australian children remain on the peripheries of story time.

Barack Obama takes up this very idea up in his memoir *Dreams from my Father* (2004). As a keen but relatively inexperienced community organiser in the disadvantaged inner city area of Chicago, Obama goes to meet a school counsellor, Asante Moran whose argument is resonant of the political cultural contexts here:

The public school system is not about educating black children. Never has been. Inner-city schools are about social control. Period. They’re operated as holding pens – miniature jails really. It’s only when black children start breaking out of their pens and bothering white people that society even pays any attention to the issue of whether these children are being educated.

Just think about what a real education for these children would involve. It would start by giving a child an understanding of himself, his world, his culture, his

community. That's the starting point of any educational process. That's what makes a child hungry to learn – the promise of being part of something But for the black child, everything's turned upside down. From day one, what's he learning about? Someone else's history. Someone else's culture. Not only that. This culture he's supposed to learn is the same culture that's systematically rejected him, denied his humanity (Moran 258).

As the marginalised come to voice via the Archive of the Displaced, an occasion for a discursive move that gestures towards a more complex engagement with the multiracial and multicultural worlds is thus possible. A discussion might start with a critique of the monologic curriculum, scrutinising the inability (or unwillingness) to articulate, speak about, give voice to, make connections between the oppressive and repressive forces that confine and negate individuals as racialised bodies, incapable of speaking for themselves.

Final footnotes from the archive. Fatmata Mansaray, a member of the Sierra Leonean Women's Association writes:

Story telling is important in our culture. Spoken language and song is important to us ... we want our children to know the language, to know who they are, to know their history and heritage. It is hard in the West to grow children because there are so many different things that pull children this way, pull children that way. In Sierra Leonean culture, respect is very important ... As the proverb says, 'If you don't know where you are heading, you should know where you have come from.'

We love our children. We looked after them and protected them in the most awful of situations. And now we want to tell our stories. Our stories are not easy to tell. They bring up all the pain and suffering that we didn't have time to process because we were running from war, from death. Many of us could not bury our loved ones. Many of us could not properly mourn our loss.

We need to hear these stories. They are stories which are a lesson against war. How could any person take a whole people to war or declare war if they had been through one themselves? It is those who have seen first hand the effects of war who can teach those ones who wave their sticks and bombs at others how senseless and criminal their actions are. Our scars stay with us, but our voices remain strong (Mansaray 2006).

And so, Ledwith argues that the telling of stories ultimately can be the vehicle of our understanding (62). For educators, community workers, artists and cultural activists, this approach, based on a respectful reciprocity, might underpin how we build new epistemologies, how we offer new ways of seeing the world, and crucially, how we move towards new ways of being in the multicultural nation.

WORKS CITED

Bread and Other Stories: A collection of writings. Bankstown Area Multicultural Network, 2001.

Afghan Women's Dobaiti Poetry: A community cultural development project.
Bankstown Area Multicultural Network, 2006.

The Book of African Australian Stories. Bankstown Area Multicultural Network, 2006.

Poetry Over Rooftops: contemporary writings by Afghan women. Bankstown Area Multicultural Network, 2006.

The Book of the Living: Sierra Leonean Women Tell their Stories. Sierra Leone Women's Wan Word Inc, 2006.

Abood P and E. Yongai. *The Book of African Australian Stories.* Bankstown Area Multicultural Network, 2006.

Anthias, F. 'Diasporic hybridity and transcending racisms: problems and potential' in *Rethinking Anti-racisms*. Anthias F. and C. Loyd, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

Chancy, M.J.A. *Searching for Safe Spaces: Afro-Caribbean Women Writers in Exile.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997.

Ledwith, M. *Community Development: A Critical Approach.* Bristol: Policy Press, 2005.

Majaj, L.S. 'Voice, Representation, and Resistance' in Majaj, L.S. and P.W. Sunderman and T. Saliba, eds. *Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women's Novels.* New York: Syracuse U P, 2002.

Mansaray, F. *The Book of the Living: Sierra Leonean Women Tell their Stories.* Sierra Leone: Women's Wan Word Inc, 2006.

Obama, B. *Dreams from my Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance.* New York: Crown Publishers, 2004.